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The Noises that Weren't There

Charles Williams

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Abstract

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The NOISES THAT WEREN'T THERE
by Charles Williams

INTRODUCTION BY GLENN E. SADLER

Charles Williams died on May 15, 1945, at the age of fifty-eight, on the sixth day after the end of World War II. His sparkling Shelleyian genius was cut short and some of his greatest literary dreams remain unfinished; for example the final Arthurian poems, "The Figure of Arthur" fragment, the "Figure of Wordsworth" (never begun) and a final novel.

Regarding her husband's post-war writing plans, Mrs. Williams has told us that she recalls him saying: "And I shall write one more novel, which my faithful public will not like, I think. This time it will be a straightforward one. There will be no black magic, no dancing figures, and no supernatural beings wandering through its pages." During a delightful co-inhering chat with Mrs. Williams, at her Hampstead, London, home, I asked her if "The Noises That Weren't There" could possibly be that novel. She replied that frequently her husband began and then discarded parts of poems and novels but that it is possible this was to be his last, "straightforward one." It is interesting that the novel takes place shortly after the war and that the haunted house in it is like many such places Williams must have seen (and visited?) as he explored the devastated City.

The three chapters which remain (in typescript) are of interest, I think, to those who have taken the Way of the City throughout William's seven published metaphysical thrillers. The conventional but witty conversations (some of which were recorded, says Mrs. Williams, while her husband was riding the London tube) in them, the intermingling in them of natural and supernatural things and occurrences (this time of a haunted house, filled with postponed sounds, which has in it the nude "dissolving, sandy" body of a young woman) reminds us of William's fondness for the theme of interpenetration and coinherence. And of course there is in this novel fragment the image of the City; it is Williams' last journey through it:

> "A distant clock struck eleven; the vigil began. As they waited, there came through the open holes in the walls the sound of the City.... A throb of resurrection held the night; the City stirred from its preoccupation and began again to think of joy. Poor and perverse, to many, that joy might be, hardly worthy to be called by the august word. The re-action from the war would soon be, in some, towards excitement; in some, towards sheer bad-temper. The pains and problems of Europe and the hour were very great; and far away, in the East, the armies and navies and air-fleets moved to their duty still. But the change in the City could not be content, for however brief a time, with any word but joy..."

Would that Charles Williams had lived to finish telling us what happened when the clock struck twelve, after All Hallows' Eve.

CHAPTER I -- The Noises That Weren't There*

Clarissa said into the telephone: "Good-morning, Colonel."

Her godfather's voice went on: "I promised to ring you up, and I'm doing it. Can you come down here this morning for an hour or two?"

"Certainly I can," Clarissa answered. "Now?"

"Now would do very well," Colonel Benton said. "We'll go out to the place together. Mind you, there'll be nothing for you to do, because our people have covered it all in the usual way; in fact it's only because they've done their job so far that I'm talking to you. But you wanted me to let you know if anything in your line came along, and this is as near as we're likely to get,... short of a murder at a spiritualist seance."

"But tell me a little more, Colonel," said Clarissa. "What is it? and what made you think of me?"

"It's a dead girl," the Colonel answered. "She was found this morning in an empty house just across the river from Charing Cross. No sign of how she died, nor of her clothes. What made me think of you was that the house is said to be haunted. We haven't got much about that yet, my people not thinking it of the first importance."

"Where is the house?" Clarissa asked.

"59 Union Square. Ever hear of it in your psychical explorations?"

"I don't think I remember it," Clarissa said slowly. "But I'll look before I come. You think someone killed her?"

"Someone took away her clothes," the Colonel answered. "The report, which I found when I got here this morning, only mentions ghosts parenthetically."

"Ghosts?" Clarissa said.

"Ghosts or a ghost. I suppose that's what's meant by haunted," the Colonel said, a little irritably. "But do as you like."

Clarissa was silent for a few seconds; then she said, "Yes... yes. Shall I come to you or go to the house?"

"Meet me here and I'll take you over and introduce you to the Superintendent. But mind you, no interference. If you want to make any notes about the house you can, but we'll deal with the murder ourselves."

"I'll be with you just as soon as I can," Clarissa said. "Good-bye." She put down the receiver and stood up.

Clarissa Drayton was a woman of about thirty-three, dark in colour and dark also from the sun. But under the tan her flesh had a clearness which matched her vigorous and shining eyes. Her face might at first have seemed a little worn. It was not; only it seemed to have lost all superfluity, so that its pattern was marked, and there was no dimming of it any more than in the directness of her look. That look seemed, in its casual glance or direct gaze, to apprehend things with a warm and sensuous, but undesiring, passion; there lurked in it a hint of glowing joy. Eros, and all that is meant by Eros, lived there in some greater continent, of which the rational centre lay behind her faintly-lined forehead and below her smooth black hair. Her movements were as swift as they were restrained.

She went now to the cabinet in which she kept the records of those investigations to which the Colonel had referred. She smiled a little as she moved, thinking tenderly of her godfather's kindness. Colonel Benton, as she knew, very much disliked all that activity in which her own capacities

had involved her, and as she opened the drawers she thought of him with gratitude. She was as well aware as he of the many frauds who pick up what is, one way or another, a perilous financial sustenance in odd ways of psychical traffic, and of the many fools who fatten themselves emotionally on the very dubious food to be found there. It had once seemed to her her own misfortune that she should possess that sharp awareness which was so often, and often so untruthfully, claimed by others. It had come to her perhaps from her great-grandmother, who had been a Roman Lady married to a Drayton of the Regency. Certainly there were no family records of any arch-normal perceptions in her; unless indeed the fact that, after her young husband's death, she had retired again to Italy and there taken the veil, pointed to any. Reports had come from Italy, before the outbreak of the war, that proposals for her beautification were to be set on foot. The war was over now, and preparations for the peace conferences were going on. But contacts lost during the fighting had not yet been renewed. Clarissa, in all courtesy, envied her ancestress. That sharpness of apprehension, felt in the soul's centre, had sometimes made saints, she knew; but, eccentric, was more likely to make sinners and sorcerers. She was, sometimes, afraid.

It was at such moments that she recollected with relief Colonel Benton's passion for organization or her brother Jonathan's genius for painting. Every man had some distinguishing power; in all the human race there had never yet been anyone who had not his proper signature and his way of writing it upon the world; never yet anyone so poor as not to deserve reverence, and that not only for his proper spirit but also for his sheer human capacity. But through the failure of men in society this remained in most uncouth or unnoticed, and was neglected or despised. Men's apprehensions could not be stressed to note the fine distinctions. Hers was no more than any. It was a sudden quick sense — psychic? the word had been vulgarized; spiritual? too pretentious; mental? physical rather, lying in her flesh, working by sight and hearing and touch: a sense of other states and other beings, literally 'a second sight.' It had been with her

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since her girlhood, but it had developed with her maturing years. Her father had been very wise; he had at first thought it a fancy, but there had been episodes which convinced him of coincidence, if of no more. She had, for example, once seen a neighbor in the country bleeding in a railway accident; she had seen in one place a house that had not been yet built and in another one that had been pulled down. These phantasma lasted each but a few moments; they formed and dissolved, or were heard and then were silent, in the midst of her general attention; and they sent before them always a kind of tingling expectation, so that she grew to know and distinguish them from any normal awareness of her environment. She would feel that tingling, and while she was talking would see behind the companion another vision of his form writing or waiting in a doorway or driving at great speed in the night. Or sometimes, with the same preceding sensation, there looked at her through his eyes another self, a slyness, a hatred, a holiness, a laughter, a fear. The underworld of a soul lay clear and then was closed.

Such moments were not many, nor could she find that they came by any rule. Her capacity worked with more ordered certainty when she was concerned with what is more generally called 'another world.' She had, after taking her medical degree and putting in some years of training, become until the war an investigator for the Society for Psychical Research. There she had been noted for the accuracy both of her observation and of her records. Her sensitiveness to phenomena went with a detailed and lucid documentation. She was chiefly responsible for the reports on the poltergeist at Malvern in 1936 and the haunted villa at Aberystwyth in 1937; the doubtful case of suspected vampire manifestations at Oxford in 1938 owed whatever value it had to her exact statements. Such manifestations are rare in England and the case awaited comparison with others before any kind of even provisional decision could be reached. She had kept her own full notes of these affairs and of others, collecting them with such further evidence as her historical reading supplied. The chief difficulty was precisely the lack of reliable evidence; it sometimes seemed to her astonishing that men could have lived so long in society without apparently understanding what could and what could not be regarded as evidence. With all its faults, the modern age had at least produced this; and until this was produced, law and judgement had hardly been able to begin to operate. She noted her own sensations with as much accuracy as possible. What her senses told her might or might not be actual; she suspected that in many cases the thing present, if anything was present, only communicated itself by one or other sense, but in itself belonged to none. Yet her long experience was not without value; she began, beyond her senses, to grow in knowledge.

During the war she had done certain hospital jobs of a therapeutic kind, and she was undecided now whether to continue with these or whether to return to psychical investigation. She had played a little with the idea of examining, if opportunity offered, the relationships between psychical manifestations and crime; and it was with this in mind that she talked to her godfather, Colonel Benton. The Colonel had been compelled by his sister, Clarissa's mother, to that office, though he took much less seriously than Clarissa now did the mystical substitution of sponsor for child which is demanded and accepted by the Rite. He was ignorantly bound by it, and as ignorantly freed when Clarissa was confirmed. But he was very fond of his goddaughter, and as an Assistant Commissioner at Scotland Yard, in a general way, had very little use for doctors of occult science. But Colonel Benton, when Clarissa talked to him, had agreed, if with some reluctance, to strain his official position so far at least as to let her know if ever any case more important than the arrest of spiritual cheap-jacks came to his notice. Clarissa understood both his hesitation and his surrender, and was grateful.

Her files offered no trace of 59 Union Square, and she abandoned them. She chose her frock and hat with a wish to do herself justice and her godfather credit in the eyes of any police officers who might be there, and set out for Westminster. Her flat was in Highgate, overlooking London; it was the upper part of a house of which the lower was occupied by her brother Jonathan and his wife. Thence, on a Saturday in September 1940 she had first seen London burning — the great pillar of fire which had stood up through the closing afternoon and the darkening evening, and shown to later destroyers the place of their work. Sometimes there, sometimes elsewhere, she had heard the humming and grunting of aerial enemies. There were moments when, remembering that dreadful autumn, in which nothing but England and London seemed to remain defiant of those scornful and triumphant wings, she indulged a fancy that those wings had triumphed indeed; that England was a burnt and desolate wilderness; and that she and all those she knew were already dead and now, in some other state, permitted to enjoy a sense of that just victory which had been forbidden them on earth. It would be, were that so, the earth and its affairs which still haunted them; they still thought and felt in those terms, and so, for a little, must, but presently they would emerge into the clarity of a greater City than London, though it might at first show in the shape of a London redeemed and renewed.

However, she thought, as she got out of her taxi, Scotland Yard would presumably not form part of that London. Bunyan had set a gate to hell close to the Celestial City, but even he had kept it outside and beyond a river, and she was not disposed to limit her renewed London to the southern bank of the Thames. So she supposed it could not be so yet. Still, whether those dim and strange forms men called ghosts and apparitions haunted earth or earth haunted them she was not prepared to say. She inclined to think, on the whole, that they were in general employed by some other business to which earth was only incidental, but...

She saw the Colonel at the gate of the Yard and waved. He came to meet her and took her to the waiting car. As soon as they were settled, it moved off, and she said, smiling at him, "Tell me more, Colonel."

The Colonel stretched his long legs. He said: "Well... The report was waiting for me when I arrived two hours ago, soon after nine. The house is one of those that just missed the blitz, though most of its neighbors were destroyed. It's one of those private houses you still find in the midst of offices and warehouses; it's been empty from a year or two before the war. One of our younger Inspectors was on his way home early this morning, between one and two, and was walking through the Square when he thought he heard a noise."

He paused and looked at Clarissa. She thought he only waited for her question and she said promptly: "Yes? What sort of a noise?"

The Colonel went on looking at her with that kind of humorous deprecation with which he tended to cover any apparent absurdity, and said: "To be exact — you shall see the report presently — he said he felt that there ought to have been a noise. He didn't go into details, and I haven't seen him yet; he'll be at the house. I don't know what he meant, but it was when I read that sentence that I first thought of you. He's a good intelligent young fellow; we kept him with us at the Yard during the war for that reason, though it's true his lungs aren't any too good."

Clarissa was gazing thoughtfully in front of her. She looked back at her godfather and said: "That sounds very interesting, if he means what I think he may, I don't know that he could put it better. It's the sound which hasn't happened of a thing that has. I've felt it once or twice, and it's very disturbing. Yes; you shall show me the report, and I'd like to talk to the Inspector too."

"So you shall," the Colonel said. "You may find out more of what he means. However... In consequence of not hearing this noise, young Challis went up and by the light of the moon he saw through a window that wasn't a window—"

"The result of the noise that wasn't a noise," Clarissa murmured. "If you can say that of a window—"

"Don't be clever, Clarissa," the Colonel said. "That's playing with words. You know quite well what I mean. He saw a woman's body lying on the floor. He therefore called the constable on the beat, and they climbed in. They found the corpse of a young woman, without her clothes. The cause of death, at present, is unknown; there's no wound and no outward sign of poison. The P.M. will be done this afternoon, and we may know more then. The rest is routine stuff."

"You don't know who she is?" Clarissa asked.

"Not yet. We shall," the Colonel answered.

"M..m.. yes," said Clarissa. "And the hauntings?"

"All we have about them, and all we're likely to have unless you can tell us more, has been told us by the manager of Messrs. Hatching's surgical instrument warehouse, which is next door. His name is Knowles, and he seems to have got his extremely vague information from the girls in his employment. He's been there for twenty years, and the house, even when it was inhabited, has always had that kind of slightly sinister reputation. In fact, he says that from time to time girls have left because of it. But he can't give any details, and it's not worth our while to make any further inquiries on those lines."

"How long is it since it was lived in?" Clarissa asked.

"Since 1936 — no, 1937," the Colonel said. "And then it was by a most respectable old Lady, of the name of Leclerc. The house belonged to her, but she's in the country now, and we aren't in touch with her yet."

"I see," Clarissa said, and sat silent, till presently the car slowed down and the Colonel said: "Here we are."

They were in what had once been a long and dingy square. It was now mostly devastation. No. 59 was at one end; beyond it, Messrs. Hatching's warehouse led off down a side street. The house was oldish — probably early nineteenth century, double-fronted, depressing. The glass, as the Colonel had said, was missing from the windows, and chunks of plaster had fallen from the walls. Any ghostly inhabitant could only, it would seem, belong to the most lack-colour bourgeoisie of hell, corresponding to its own discoloured poverty.

The front-door stood open. A few of Messrs. Hatching's drivers and girl-clerks lingered a little distance off. Colonel Benton and Clarissa crossed the pavement, and went up the steps. The Colonel stood aside for Clarissa, and she stepped across the threshold and took a few paces into the hall. On her right a constable was coming out of a room towards the front door. When he saw her he quickened his steps and began to speak, but he caught sight of Colonel Benton behind her, checked himself, and saluted. The Colonel nodded back.

As Clarissa entered the hall, the first faint sound reached her, as it comes to a man reading alone in his room by night. She heard, or seemed to hear, the sudden tentative scratch, the quick scurry, the renewed silence. As, moving forward, she attentively listened, the sound recurred and grew. With each one of her steps, it increased out of all proportion to the short distance covered; it was softly multiplied on all sides. She had never had any particular fear of mice, and there was no reason why she should think of them now. Yet it seemed as if all the mice in all the world were at work behind those walls, scurrying, scratching, nibbling, millions and millions of tiny claws and tiny teeth. She stood still, revolted by that sense of secret multitudinous hustle; it was so ludicrous and so horrid.

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No walls could long sustain themselves under such an immense outbreak of elfish activity; she felt they must, in another moment, give way and let the huge armies of dirt-dropping vermin through. The vermin were rushing to and fro beneath her, also; she had quite definitely to refuse to raise her feet from the floor. Among the unceasing soft scrabble there emerged another sound — the high-pitched noise which certain kinds of mice make, a recurrent thin squeal. It was not very clear, for all those other noises drowned it, but every now and then it pierced through them. It pierced them like a cry — scratch, scurry, scurry, squeal; and a cloud of dust seemed to float down on her where, from among the joists above, the creatures nibbled and tore.

She stood listening. She knew very well that she alone of the three heard it. Colonel Benton disliked mice almost as much as some women, and he would never have remained silent under such an astonishing activity of mice, however much like them it sounded. She would have known that whether Colonel Benton had heard it or not; the mere volume of the sound in her ears would have told her, even if she had not been instructed by other experiences. Something was going on which happened to translate itself into that sound when sensitive ears were near. It was not aimed at her; it did not probably even know of her; she had merely walked into the middle of it. This too was a noise that wasn't there; it was a pressure felt in her body and changed by her body into the noise. This knowledge did not make the thing easier to bear physically; her senses were still inconvenienced. Her private meditations could, from long practise, continue under any such invasion; but all such invasions mastered for the time being whatever sense they attached. She could not hear doubly. She saw Colonel Benton turn to her; she heard his voice, but the words were lost. Glowing with a sudden small anger at the interference, and aware that it might deepen if she went further into the house, she took another step forward and said — it was more a thought than a word, and neither the Colonel nor the constable heard it, and hardly she herself — she said: "Tacete!"

The noise ceased at once, again with a ludicrous likeness to actuality. So, exactly so, the scratching gnawing mice do stop when a man stirs. The silence was exactly the silence that comes when the vermin in the walls crouch palpitating, aware of a presence they had not suspected. Whatever in this house caused that sound, whatever it was at which she had aimed her command, was now similarly aware. It remained in suspense, and in its turn listening intently. How much of her world it could catch in its apprehension she did not know; it might have paused in almost animal shock and fear, or it might now have had its attention roused and be capable of some elementary understanding. On that "Tacete!" she instantly moved forward; the silence accompanied her. She went past the constable into the room on her right. Colonel Benton went after her.

It was a poky little room, and must when all those other buildings were still standing have been very dark and airless. But now, on that September day, the wind was blowing gently through the unglassed windows and the sun was shining full on the dirty uncarpeted floor. The wallpaper was a dull grey, ragged and stained. There were several people in the room, who were moving and speaking together. They looked around, and when they saw the Colonel gave him their attention immediately. So that, beyond them, she could see against the farther wall the body of which she had been told. It was that of a young fair-haired girl, under-sized and apparently under-nourished, for it was distressingly thin. It lay at length on its back, staring upward. Clarissa stood looking at it. Her godfather talked for a few moments to the police; then he spoke again to her.

"Clarissa, this is Superintendent Matheson, who's in charge of the investigation. Miss Drayton, Superintendent. And here," he went on, "is Inspector Challis." He was young for his rank -- no more than a year or two older than herself, if that; and a half-inch or so taller than she, which would make him all but six feet. His face was inclined to be roundish; it had a strong chin and steady brown eyes. His hair was brown, thick, and smooth. They gazed at each other gravely, each concerned with something behind the other; then Clarissa said: "Inspector, I want to talk to you, and Colonel Benton says I may. Will you come to lunch with me?"

"Yes, thank you, Miss Drayton," Challis said. He spoke simply enough, but Clarissa thought there was a note of caution in his cold voice, as if he did not wish to commit himself to anything. She went on: "Good. It'll be scratch, but you'll excuse that. 34 Aragon Street, Highgate; it's at the top of the Hill. At one?"

"At one," he said, bowed, and stepped back. She said to the Superintendent, "Superintendent, I know you want to get on—"

"Perfectly all right, Miss Drayton," the Superintendent said. "Colonel Benton asked us to leave things as they were till you'd seen them."

"It's very kind of you," Clarissa said. "I promise you I won't interfere. May I just look at the body before you have it taken away?"

"Anything you like, Miss Drayton," Matheson said, waving a hand placidly in the air. Clarissa smiled at him as sweetly as she could, thinking: "He is being so polite that he must dislike me very much," and walked over to the body of the girl, while Colonel Benton resumed his conversation with his officers.

Clarissa stood looking down on the corpse. It was odd about the clothes, though she could think of several ordinary reasons for it, let alone extraordinary. It was odd about the lack of all wounds and of all signs of pain and distress. Starvation? no; the thinness of the body had not that appearance of emaciation which starvation would bring. The girl lay there, and — "Surely that leg is twisted to a very curious angle," Clarissa thought. She put down her bag and gloves, fell on her knees, and began deliberately to touch and handle the limbs, then the trunk. Her hands — she had lovely hands — moved gently, almost cautiously, raising and pressing, while her eyes searched. The Superintendent, watching, compared her movements to those of the police-surgeon, not altogether in his own mind to Clarissa's credit. "Pernickety," he thought; "all right for a woman, and probably, even with the fire-watching and all, not accustomed to corpses. But we shouldn't get far like that. Now the doctor handles a corpse as if he knew about it. Education or no education, there's a difference between a woman and a man."

Clarissa stood up; she brushed her hands together with none of the delicacy she had used on the body, and came back to the others. "Colonel, did you say the P. M. was going to be this afternoon?" she asked.

"I expect so," her godfather answered. "It's a little late to get it through this morning."

"May I have a copy of the report?" Clarissa asked. The Colonel, with a glance, passed on this question to the Superintendent as to the officer in charge. He answered mildly: "Why, yes, Miss Drayton. I'll give special instructions, and I'll try to have it posted to you to-night." The slight stress on the words "posted to you" was meant to preclude any tendency on Miss Drayton's part to call at the Yard. Clarissa hardly noticed it; she looked as if she was about to add something more, and then changed her mind. She smiled generously at the Superintendent and turned to her godfather. "Thank you so very much, Colonel," she said. "I won't keep you any more now. May I come back to the house some time, Superintendent?"

"Of course, Miss Drayton," Matheson answered. "Let me know and I'll arrange it. You've finished with—" He nodded towards the body.

Still with a slight hesitation, Clarissa said: "Yes, I think so." She looked distastefully at her hands, almost as if she had found them stained with the dead girl's blood.

"Well, come along then," said the Colonel; and as Clarissa with a final 'At one?' to the Inspector joined him, he went on ignorant of the Superintendent's diplomacy: "Where do you want to go? Can I drop you? Or will you come to the Yard and read the file?"

"If you've got anywhere at the Yard where I can wash," his goddaughter said, as they came again into the hall. She listened as they went through it, but there was no sound — except, once, just as she reached the front door, the faintest scurry behind her, as if a single mouse had fled in one frenzied rush across the hall. They came again into the open air.

An hour or two later Inspector Challis arrived at the flat. Clarissa took him straight to her dining-room, saying: "I'm being entirely selfish and doing you out of any reasonable food because I want you to talk to me. Do sit down." She chatted for a few minutes till they were properly settled at the meal; then she said: "And now, Mr. Challis, will you tell me exactly what happened last night?"

Challis considered. "You saw the reports?" he said.

Clarissa nodded. "I read them very carefully," she said. "Especially yours. But except for yours, from my point of view they don't tell us very much."

"What is your point of view, Miss Drayton?" Challis asked.

"Do you mind if we don't go into that yet?" Clarissa said. "I'd so much rather hear you first."

"Well... I don't quite know what I can tell you beyond my report," Challis said. "Everything was normal except for the odd sensation of hearing the noise. I mean, of course," he added hastily, "it was normal to us."

"It's the noise I want to hear about," said Clarissa. "But first — did you hear anything out of the way in the house itself this morning?"

Challis looked at her in a little surprise. "Why no," he said; "nothing at all beyond the noise we made ourselves. Was there anything to hear?"

Clarissa with a small movement put the question by. "I'll tell you my part presently; let's get yours clear first. Have some more salad? Now—"

"Well..." Challis began slowly, "I was walking home from the Yard. I'd been kept very late on another case — nothing to do with this — and my rooms are down near the Oval, so I walked. It was a lovely night — moon

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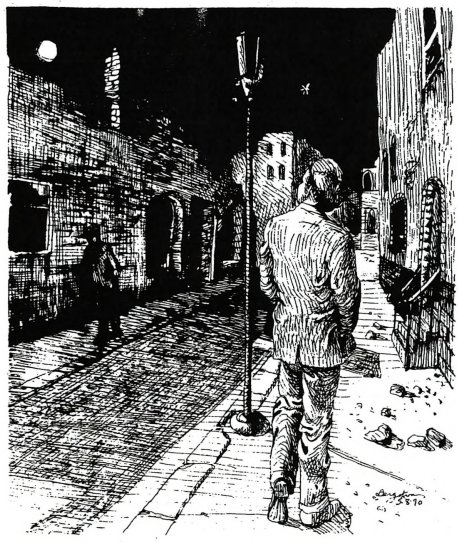

and stars and a little cloud — and I was thinking..." He stopped and added more coldly: "I suppose you'd like to know what I was thinking about. It might explain everything."

"I shall be very surprised if it does," Clarissa said, "and I certainly don't want to seem impertinent. But yes — if you would just hint at it. It might conceivably be useful."

Challis looked at the table. He said: "If you want to know, I'll tell you. I was thinking about my wife. She was killed about a year ago in one of the last raids. We had been married three weeks."

Clarissa said softly: "I see. She was killed by a bomb?"

"She was," Challis answered. "So you see, Miss Drayton, that was why I imagined that I heard a bomb, as you're no doubt going to tell me..."

"Please, Mr. Challis... I wasn't going to tell you anything of the kind. I don't even know that you did imagine it, and honestly I don't think you did."

Challis stared. "There certainly wasn't a bomb, and really now I'm not quite sure if I ever thought there was. But I—"

Clarissa struck in: "You were going to tell me in order."

"So I was." Challis paused. "Well... I was walking home, as I told you. The stars were very bright and low, even if they didn't show so well as they used to because there's more light in the streets. I remember feeling that walking through the streets wasn't very different. There seemed to be no beginning to the streets and no end to them, and one wasn't getting anywhere, whether one was walking down them or up them; and I remember wondering if perhaps I was doing both at once, and that another I whom I couldn't see was walking past me in the other direction, but never getting past me any more than I could get past him. So there we were, both of us walking very fast in opposite directions, but never getting away from each other." He stopped and smiled. "You know the kind of fancy one has at one in the morning; besides I didn't want to go on thinking of..." he paused, "...my wife. And then I heard an aeroplane a long way off — bomb-suggestion again, you see—"

"I wouldn't bother about putting in the suggestions, Mr. Challis," Clarissa said. "I don't think you believe them, and I'm sure I don't."

"But I thought that was exactly what you mental experts did believe," Challis exclaimed. "Association and transference and so on."

"Association perhaps," Clarissa said, "but not quite like that. And pray don't call me a mental expert, Mr. Challis. And whether you do or not, please go on."

"I was at the other end of Union Square when I heard the plane. I'd lost the sound of it before I was half-way down the side of the square, and when that had gone it seemed quieter than ever. I walked on thinking — well, thinking — until I was almost up to the house. Then I heard the explosion of a bomb. I heard it exactly as one does hear such things — quite close at hand. There didn't seem to be any blast; it was just the sound. Only, you see, there wasn't a bomb."

He leant forward towards Clarissa's attentive eyes. "That's the whole point, you see. There was nothing. And I heard something, something outside me, no explosion in the brain or anything of that sort. I knew it — Oh as one knows anything of the kind, only I couldn't fix it. Can you imagine — Oh suppose you knew the war had broken out again, and all the armies were fighting everywhere, and none of the morning papers said a thing about it."

Clarissa said slowly: "You didn't put it as strongly as that in your report, did you?"

He answered: "I put it as clearly as I could. I don't want to get a reputation for eccentricity at the Yard. I tried to give them a subdued version." He yielded to a reluctant smile. "To tell you the truth, Miss Drayton, when Colonel Benton said you were a mental expert, I thought I had overdone it, and he was being tactful."

She laughed back at him. "I thought that had happened, as soon as you used the words," she said. "Well, but go on. What did you do then?"

He settled more freely and easily to his story. "I looked at the time," he said. "Yes, I know that sounds ridiculous, but it's what we're trained to do. It was nineteen minutes to two. And then I noticed exactly where I was standing — one pace short of the only electric light standard left. Not that it gave any light. That was all automatic and took less than a second. Then I looked around. There was absolutely no sign of anything having happened. And there was I, stuck like a fool in Union Square at nineteen minutes to two on the sixty-seventh morning of the peace or whatever it is, with the complete certainty that an invisible and silent bomb, doing no damage, had just gone off in front of me."

Clarissa, leaning a little forward, said: "In front of you? You did know that?"

Challis blinked at her. "Yes..." he said, "yes... I do now you put it to me. I hadn't realized it before."

"Nearer the house, in fact? Or even in the house?"

He considered this. "Nearer the house, yes. I don't think I at first thought of it as being in the house. But then did I — yes, I did look round. But I didn't turn round. I didn't look right behind me. That's odd. Why didn't I turn round?"

Clarissa said nothing. He went on: "I must somehow have known whereabouts it was, though till this minute I didn't think I did. I went on for a few steps, and I saw the moon shining in at the holes in the house; I mean the windows, but they were like great holes, and I went up to one of them..." He stopped abruptly, and said: "That's odd again. I remember being surprised that I didn't hear any glass smash under me. Miss Drayton, this is quite ridiculous. You're making me out a worse fool than I had supposed. I must at least have known perfectly well that, whatever had happened, those windows had not just been blown out."

Clarissa said: "You called them holes just now."

"But they weren't holes," Challis argued. "Or at least if they were, it was only by accident. If I'd thought of them as holes I shouldn't have expected glass. And as I did expect glass—"

Clarissa interrupted him. "Now you're arguing about it. Let's leave that till later. Go on, Mr. Challis. You went to the window, and you noticed that you weren't treading on glass. That surprised you."

"Yes, but I must have known that..."

"Oh never mind what you must have known," Clarissa exclaimed. "That's what you're thinking now while we're talking about it. All that matters is what you thought and felt then before we talked. You went up and looked in?"

"The moon was very bright," Challis said obediently, "and it shone all over the floor. And there was a girl's body."

He got up suddenly and took a step or two away; then he came back. "You know, I remember that at first I didn't think it was a body. It didn't look like one. It looked... it looked like a heap of sand, the sort of thing you see in a children's playground or nursery..." He forced a smile, and added in a slightly unreal voice: "Miss Drayton, will you forgive me if I say: 'How it all comes back!'"

"No," said Clarissa, rising also. "Don't waste time, Mr. Challis, and don't fuss. You are neither mad nor drunk and you saw in the moonlight a thing like a heap of sand lying in a children's playground. Very well. What did you feel about it?"

"I felt it was unbearably horrible," Challis said. "I was utterly revolted. It was so simple and innocent and... I don't know. It was all over in a moment, and I saw it was only a girl's dead body, and I felt all right. It was so quick that I'd honestly forgotten all about it till now."

They had both walked away from the table towards the window. Challis stood and looked out, his face becoming hard and fixed. Clarissa glanced at him, then she said: "It wasn't frightening — or was it?"

"No," he answered, "it wasn't frightening. It was horrible but not terrifying. It was obscene."

He paused. Clarissa was silent. He resumed: "It was all so quick. I thought -- or did I? am I just making this up?" He looked at her, and then as their eyes met he went on: "No; all right; I'm not. It came and went almost literally in no time, but I'm sure I'm remembering and not inventing. I thought: 'Sand. Children's sand.' And then I thought: 'God, no; not children — not with that.'"

"What was so horrible about it?" Clarissa asked.

He spread his hands out. "Only that. It was a playground of... something no child must come near. But why —" he shrugged. "Just sand, Miss Drayton. Then it moved — no, not slid or shifted, but moved, like a body."

"You said in your report that you thought you saw the girl move as if she was alive," Clarissa said.

Challis went on staring out of the window. He said: "I only made one mistake there. I saw it move, and then I saw it was a body. So then I knew it must have been the body that moved." He drew a long breath. "Af-

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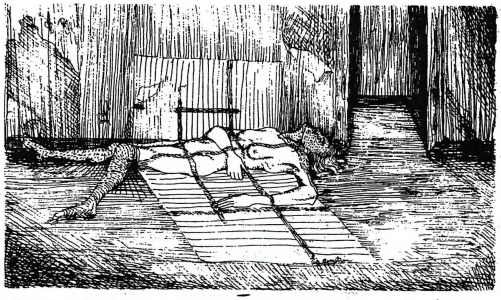

ter that, I realized I was being silly and everything else was routine."

They were both silent for some time. Then Clarissa said: "And what do you think about it now?"

He turned to her, and shrugged. "What am I to think?" he said. "There it is; that was what happened. I suppose I could persuade myself easily enough that it didn't, for I'd almost forgotten that it had till you dragged it up. But I don't want to."

"Why not, Mr. Challis?" Clarissa asked.

"Because it would be persuading myself," he answered. "I would do it willingly enough if I thought it was right, if I was being morbid or... or delirious or anything. But this now seems all so plain and certain. You don't think I'm being morbid, do you?"

She said: "Now, I don't. But will you let me, before we go on, put you through a medical examination? I'm a doctor, you know, and I promise I'll tell you exactly what I think afterwards. It would be a check for both of us. If there's anything physically wrong, we shall know; if not, I may ask you to do something for me."

"There's my lung, you know," he said. "But just as you like. Now?"

"Why not?" she said. "Come into the other room, will you?"

Three-quarters of an hour afterwards, Challis was settling his tie, and Clarissa was standing by the table glancing over her notes. When he turned to her, she took up a box of cigarettes, offered them to him, took one, and as he threw away the match said: "Let's sit down. Now, Mr. Challis. First of all, you're entirely sound, so far as I can find. The lung is nothing. You're as near normal, physically, as any ordinary man can hope to be. Does that satisfy you?... Very well. Second, I've listened to everything you could say, and I believe implicitly everything you say. I believe that something happened, and you knew of it; that there was a shock which, as near as you could hear it, sounded like a bomb, and that what you saw in that room was much like sand as a body, though at present it keeps the shape of a body. I believe you saw it move, and I quite certainly believe that it was something no child had better come near — nor anyone else if it can be helped. Does that satisfy you?... Very well. And thirdly I want to know if you will come again to that house to-night with me. I don't know what we may hear or see -- nothing, very likely; and if we do, we shan't be sure what it is. But I mean to go myself, and I'd be very glad if you would come too."

"Of course I will," Challis answered. "Why not? I don't quite see why you want to go; our people ransacked it pretty completely. But if you'd like to look over it again, I'll certainly come."

Clarissa looked at him thoughtfully. "Yes," she said. "Thank you. Only — don't forget the sand, will you? I mean, if we're to take it that you saw what you described, then for the present we must take it so altogether, mustn't we? I do. But I'd like to be sure that you do."

Challis sat back, thinking. She saw his face harden again as he said: "You really mean it was as loathsome as that?"

"I mean we must take it so," she answered, and added abruptly: "Personally, I think it was."

"But sand—" he objected, "after all, even I — now — can see that they've got the body. I've seen it long enough myself. I told you what I thought I saw then, but... Why, the doctor'll be doing the P. M. — now, perhaps; soon anyhow."

"Yes," Clarissa said, "yes. When you say the P. M. — Oh well, never mind that yet. But I've cancelled an appointment with a hair-dresser this afternoon, because I've told the Colonel that I shall ring him up presently to hear about the result of that P. M. If it's what I think it may be—. You must understand, Mr. Challis, that if you come to-night, you come to look for clues to the bomb that wasn't there and to the sand that became a body. And to the mice."

"Mice?" he asked.

She told him, briefly, of her own experience, of hearing the mice that were also not there. Ending, and pressing out her cigarette, "You see," she said, "it's all a very odd business. And in a way none of mine. You have every right to do as you choose. But I can't reconcile myself to leaving it as it is without any kind of further effort."

Challis suddenly grinned at her. "I doubt if you've tried very hard," he said.

Clarissa stared at him for a moment, almost as if taken aback by his words, and all but inclined to be offended. Then she relaxed and herself broke into a quick answering smile. He was astonished at its rich delight; her eyes danced, her mouth quivered, and in that release of joy she stood up and stretched her arms as if in relief after the heaviness of their long talk. "Well, no," she said, "perhaps I haven't. You're very good for me, Mr. Challis. There's a risk, of course, but really very little. What I do so hate is the filth. But a bath" — her voice changed to a serener joy — "and the Eucharist, and it's gone."

"The—" said Challis, startled. "Oh yes, of course, the—" He stumbled so obviously over the word that her smile came back and then she laughed outright.

"Oh I do beg your pardon," she said and stretched out her hand to him. As he took it, she went on: "You looked so surprised that I couldn't help it. Never mind that now. Where shall I find you to-night? Say, at half-past ten?"

"Half-past ten!" he exclaimed.

"You think that's rather late?" she said. "In my experience, it's not usually much good being earlier."

"I was thinking of the evening," he said. "If you want to look over the house, it'll be dark by then."

"We'd better perhaps be there before dark," she said; "after all, I don't know the house. But it's generally from twelve to two that one ought to be about. Only it makes it a long time and too long a time makes one stale."

"Couldn't we go and look at it about seven," Challis suggested, "and then if you'd dine with me? We could go back afterwards. Let me call for you here about half-past six; I'll get a Yard car and save trouble."

"That's very kind of you," Clarissa said. "Yes; I should like that. And now go and get some sleep if you can, for you must have been up all night. Till half-past six then, Mr. Challis" — she smiled at him again as she opened the door — "and God defend the right."

NEXT: Chapter II — THE VOICE OF THE RAT

LINES ON THE REVEREND'S BLACK BEARD, BEGUN 20 JUNE ANNO DOMINI 1965 AT THE REQUEST OF HIS LADY-LOVE

The aesthete in her wanted it
For symmetry it gave;
Farbeit from her to admit
Nostalgia for the cave.

And though in church it may distract
Her from a prayer or two,
How strangely things opaque can act
To slant the Glory through!

—A Charles Williams Character

TO MICHAL WILLIAMS

(on the news of her passing)

The old substantial glory fades;
Gone is the blank between
The imagric stuff of which we're made
And the long-suspected dream
From which, in likeness there portrayed,
The Empire took its theme.

Done is the vigil of memory
For years by death enforced.
The Love exchanged through each to each
Reflected a larger course
As in the Emperor's House of Unity
She joins him at Its source.

—Simone Wilson
February 19, 1970

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